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THE AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF SACRED LITERATURE

A PROFESSIONAL READING COURSE ON THE PREACHING TASK OF THE MODERN MINISTER

Conducted by

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Introduction

The science of homiletics has undergone a marked change as a part of the reconstruction of theological study. According to the older practice it was the task of Old and New Testament interpretation to give to the minister the exact meaning of the Scriptures. The task of systematic theology was then to organize the teachings of Scripture into a self-consistent system which was to be preached for the salvation and edification of the people. Homiletics was then simply a "sacred rhetoric," as it was often called. It was concerned with showing the minister how to use his text, formulate his proposition, organize his discourse, and present his message effectively. But all this is changed. Our biblical studies introduce us to a great religious life and experience. Our theological studies help us to understand the meaning of our religion. But no field of study furnishes us with our preaching material ready-made. It is in the Bible, it is in Jesus, it is in the life about us, it is in the story of man's struggles and achievements. Evidently homiletics, the science of preaching, has a new task.

The formal aspect of preaching will always be important. Voice culture, literary composition, platform presence and delivery, all these techniques of preaching must be worked out. The old books on homiletics are still of great value, such as Broadus, *The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*; Phelps, *The Theory of Preaching*; and there are excellent modern works in the same field, such as Hoyt, *The Work of Preaching*; Breed, *Preparing to Preach*. Let us assume all this essential preparatory work. The question still remains: What is the task of the preacher? We undertake to answer it by considering first the goal of the preacher: What is he trying to do? What has he to say to people in the modern world? We then ask how the religion of Jesus may help him in his task. We then ask how the religion achieved in the great experiences of the Bible may help him. But religion exists beyond the Scriptures. This introduces the whole problem of evolution, culminating in the study of religion as a universal experience. How far then does the universal religious experience help the minister to see what he has to do? In view of this universal experience, on what ground may he offer his religion to those who already have one; or, to put it better, how may he help every hearer at home or abroad to achieve a religion of his own? The following books will be studied:

- Part I. The Goal of the Preacher:
 Cooley, *Social Organization*.
 Coe, *The Religion of a Mature Mind*.
University of Chicago Sermons.
- Part II. The Religion of Jesus:
 Bousset, *Jesus*.
 Case, *The Historicity of Jesus*.
 Anderson, *The Man of Nazareth*.
 Montefiore, *The Religious Teaching of Jesus*.
 Moffatt, *The Theology of the Gospels*.
- Part III. The Religion of the Bible:
 G. A. Smith, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament*.
 Goodspeed, *The Story of the New Testament*.
 Clarke, *Sixty Years with the Bible*.
 Soares, *The Social Institutions and Ideals of the Bible*.
- Part IV. The Evolution of Religion:
 Walters, *Genetics*.
 Thomas, *Source Book of Social Origins*.
 Bousset, *What Is Religion?*
- Part V. The Achievement of Religion:
 Harnack, *What Is Christianity*.
 Hermann, *Communion with God*.
 Brown, *Unity and Missions*.

Part I. The Goal of the Preacher

Required reading: Cooley, *Social Organization*; Coe, *The Religion of a Mature Mind*; *University of Chicago Sermons*.

The preacher expects to accomplish something by preaching. That is why he is a preacher. Whatever may be the other functions of the minister, and however exacting upon his time and important in his activity, he is definitely and inevitably a public speaker. He undertakes to address congregations regularly and often, and the goal of his work must be in the expectancy that possesses him as he speaks. It is fashionable today to look slightly upon public speech, especially upon preaching, yet it is very certain that preaching is increasing and not diminishing, and that many different kinds of people besides ministers are anxious to preach. It cannot, therefore, be unimportant to consider the preaching task of the modern minister.

Why modern? What is the point of the emphasis upon modernity? Because not all preachers are modern. We are not necessarily modern because we are living today. To take a far-away illustration, it is very evident that the late Pope Pius X lived in the Middle Ages and never knew what the twentieth century meant at all. Among many descriptions which have been suggested to express the peculiar character of the present age, one of the most significant is that the modern man is conscious of being in the social process. Past ages knew, of course, that manners change and men change with them, but the changes of which they thought were incidental, like the varying fashions of dress and of speech. We are

learning to think of an ongoing process, wherein nothing is static, nothing is finished. The story of man is of a social process which has been taking form in various types of social organization, of family, community, industry, government, religion, and the like, all of which have undergone and must undergo a continual change, whether for the better or for the worse at any given time is a baffling problem. The modern man knows himself to be in this process. He sees the bewildering changes going on all around him. Sometimes it seems as if everything that mankind had achieved is disintegrating before his eyes; at other times new forms of social organization appear so satisfactory as to belittle all former achievement; but again in the very moment of complacency over the attained, new necessities of readjustment become manifest and the never-ending struggle is on again.

The modern minister believes in the social process. He believes in God immanent in the process. He believes in the glorious possibilities of humanity aroused to its responsibility and opportunity. He sees a human society, progressively attainable, wherein men shall live in sympathy, loyalty, and freedom, under the blessing of God. The life, message, and teaching of Jesus point to this progressive ideal and give assurance of its possibility. The preacher feels that the better society, the human brotherhood, can be, and must be. But he knows what halts its coming. He knows it in his own experience. He sees the immaturity of the men and women about him. He understands how they rest in achieved moralities and are timorous in the face of changing social organization. He is able to estimate the disaster that the rapid recent changes in society have produced, and to understand how men who cannot see anything but the change are possessed by an engrossing self-regard and are seeking to keep what they have and to get what they can. He prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He knows that they do not think, they do not see, and that nobody has told them or told them winningly enough. He is sure that if they can see the path, if they can understand the way, the truth, the life, they will be glad and they will follow. Someone ought to speak, for there is a great message to be spoken. This realization makes him a preacher. He has a gospel, a glad word of encouragement and hope that God is moving with us, that he is ready to go with us into a better order of life than we have seen, where each shall help all, and all shall help each, and every man shall do his best for the common weal.

But the preacher is not a voice crying in the wilderness. He is not a prophet speaking in the market-place. He is a minister of a congregation. He is himself an official of one of the very social organizations that are changing and must change. This constitutes his peculiar problem of adaptation, of appreciation of the apperceptive mass to which he appeals. He is preaching to a congregation which is not fully modernized. Very few persons have any adequate perception of the social process in its totality. Most intelligent persons today have some conception of it. It is common enough to see that family life is not the same as it was a generation or two generations ago. Most people realize to a greater or less extent that industry has changed, though comparatively few realize the actual significance of the changes. But while such inevitable signs of change are recognized, many look with grave apprehension on possible changes which may nearly affect their own interests or cherished presuppositions, and the pulpit which freely

and joyously recognizes movement everywhere may be seriously in danger of being misunderstood by those who jealously guard certain spheres of human interest as apart from the influences of social change.

One type of mind most conspicuous in our congregations is that which cannot think of religion as part of the social process. Many Christians who can understand that the religions of the world and perhaps of other sects of Christendom may be the product of change and subject to change cannot think of their own religion as thus mutable. The religion that one knows in his most sacred experiences, the rites, symbols, formulas, beliefs, institutions which so satisfyingly express that religion—these must be true or else they would be false. If they are true they are eternally true. It must be recognized that a large number of most worthy and intelligent men and women cannot conceive of the relativity of truth. Truth seems to them something static, something given, something to be held, guarded, handed on. This is perhaps seen in its utmost form in those who anticipate that eventually the entire human family will belong to their own particular denomination. Scarcely less significant, however, is the more common view that the whole race of men, when they have become fully enlightened, though it may be many centuries hence, will at that time all hold the particular set of theological beliefs which express truth to some section of the church today. Such people commonly think of truth as having grown in the past up to a certain point, and many of them will accept the idea that truth is still growing, but they think of the growth as only quantitative. When they speak of progressive revelation, they mean that truth was given a little at a time, so that the deposit accumulated with the advancing centuries, but it was all carried on unchanged. There is *a* true religion. What ever belonged to that must always belong to it. The purpose of the church from this point of view is to bring people to accept this given religion with its forms, symbols, beliefs, and institutions. If any of these do not seem to be suited to the present age, so much the worse for the age.

At first sight it would seem that the preacher, whose view of life in its fulness has been his call to his task, is in a hopeless situation as the servant of a congregation that persistently thinks of religion as apart from the process which gives all of life its significance. Will there not be misunderstanding at every step? This certainly would be the case were it not for a saving condition which alters the whole situation. No Christian congregation, however tenaciously it may be attached to its social organization, and however changeless and universally significant it may conceive that organization to be, ever regards the organization as the end and goal of the divine plan. The church, or the sacrament, or the faith, is always in order to life. Nobody regards human society as satisfactory. There is always to be a Kingdom of God, at least somewhere, if only at last in the future life. As a matter of fact, the Christian church in all its branches does look to a social end as a sufficient goal of every effort and reason for every faith. To be sure this is often conceived in a transcendental manner. It is to come by miracle rather than by human achievement. It is thus like all the rest of religion, outside of the social process. But even so, the universal fact of Christian consciousness that a human brotherhood, sometime, somewhere, is the plan of God is a sufficient basis for the preaching task of the modern minister. Let it be added that all congregations are increasingly susceptible to appeals for gift and effort to improve

present social conditions; and while this is very far from an appreciation of the real human task, it is at least a basis for a better understanding.

It is not the preacher's duty to belittle the symbols and beliefs and forms of organization which today are important in the eyes of religious people. It would be just as foolish to regard slightly the national flag on the ground that so much flag-waving is a shallow and often unethical patriotism, the kind of patriotism that breeds international jealousy and foment wars. A real nationalism is a very good basis for a generous internationalism. It would perhaps be idle to discuss today whether the national form of social organization will be permanent. We cannot see beyond it any more than we can see beyond church religion. Both of them for aught we know may, in some form or other, be of permanent value. It is for us to see the values which they have, and to eliminate by disuse the disadvantages which they undoubtedly have. What the church in its transcendental thinking calls "God's plan," the preacher may constantly present as the human process, God-inspired. The charities and reforms which the church is willing to undertake because of their evident goodness, the preacher will present as the very essence of the ongoing process in which we are workers together with God. That "far-off divine event," which seems so far off and so divine as to be little concern of ours, may be shown to be in daily process of approximation. The truth of today may be so vitally set forth that it will gradually become evident that the truth of yesterday is no longer true for today. Let the preacher treat the great Bible religion so vitally that it will always be manifest that psalmists and prophets, Christ and apostles, were speaking the truth for their day; therefore, instead of being slavish imitators of them, we must get from them the inspiration to see the truth for our own time. Let the preacher use the great "words that are the makers of ideas." He who speaks of humanity, society, sympathy, mutual understanding, justice, beauty, love, of God in every human interest, of Jesus who lived with the Father in blessed peace, and lived with his brethren in inspiring friendship—that preacher will educate his congregation to an apprehension of religion as part of the wholeness of life.

Another type of mind in the congregation is that which cannot see the social process where change might affect personal interests. Most markedly is this the case in the economic sphere. There are certain things that must not change—property, rent, interest, the right of a man to conduct his own business. These surely seem to be settled facts. Of course it is conceivable that an ongoing process may change them, but that would be social anarchy; it would be the destruction of the great achievements of civilization. We cannot allow our orthodox, economic doctrines to be amenable to the social process. And this attitude is not confined to the economic sphere. The human socialization, anywhere nearer than heaven, raises some very serious questions. Is a white man to regard a negro as an equal? Is the Mongolian to stand on the same footing with the American? Is the servant and handworking class to lose its necessary subordination? The brotherhood of man has always seemed to be very beautiful in poetry, and very appropriate for life after death, but if it is involved in a social process which is actually going on, and which we are to further with passionate and sacrificial devotion, it may be very dangerous. The people who take this attitude are not bad; they are not monsters; they are not unintelligent. Of course they appreciate the inevitable-

ness of change, they glory in the advancing civilization of the modern world, but they feel that there must be some things that do not change; they are afraid of a world where everything is mutable. Naturally the things that ought not to change are those whose stability is most for their own interests. This is not so much wickedness as limited vision. The human race has always understood group justice and kindness, and has largely practiced them; but it has very little understood justice and kindness beyond the group. Our difficulty today is simply that our groups have grown so large. Man had centuries to learn how to live in a village, and he succeeded measurably in securing a rough socialization. We have got crowded together into our huge cities: our groups number millions. We do not know what to do, so we take refuge in holding on to old moralities; or, in the breakdown of old moralities through the sheer impossibility of exercising them, we revert to a primitive self-preservation.

The task of the preacher is not denouncing millionaires and trust magnates and venal labor leaders. He has to try to see for himself the wholeness of life, and then to tell his people what he sees. If there is a real social process, and if God is in it, what is a good God trying to do in factories, tenements, and slums, in great cities, in mighty enterprises? To whom does he give the earth and its fulness? Let the preacher speak of the ongoing process that has carried us beyond slavery and feudalism, and ask his hearers to pray to have a part in the further progress that shall save us from poverty and unemployment. Let him frankly preach upon our corporate sin and responsibility for suffering and evil. Let him not fail to denounce those who are careless and who will not hear the call of our modern duty. Again let him often use the "words that are makers of ideas." Let him speak of new rights that must be achieved, the right of a child to childhood, to education, to fitness for living, the right of a man to a home and wife and family, the right of a mother to a real motherhood, the right of us all to know God and to be able to believe in him, and to have God interpreted to us through a great human justice and love.

Another group of hearers in the congregation, if so be that the preacher is happy enough to attract them, is of the type of mind that is all confused by the changes that are so rapid and universal. The stable world, where faiths could be inherited, and then carried as permanent possessions, was an easier world to live in. The old authorities were in command, the parents in the home, the teachers in the schools, the ministers in the church, the magistrates in the state. There was a religious creed, an economic creed, a political creed, which everybody accepted save a few daring disbelievers. But now every social institution is changing, every creed is questioned, every authority is under the burden of proof. Most serious of all, there may not really be any social process. That is in itself a faith. We are going, but are we going on? These are not the attitudes and the questions of a few philosophers; they appear everywhere. They are in magazines; they are in the popular novels. College students, even high-school students, often young mechanics, take such a point of view. Sometimes it is flippant, and even an excuse for a disregard of all authority that one may go in the ways of self-indulgence. Sometimes it is wistful, for sooner or later every soul wants a faith. It is awful to be a disregarded and unimportant atom in a purposeless universe. It is pitiful to be without hope and without God in the world.

The task of the preacher is to bring his faith to bear on this unbelief. He too sees what these people see. But he is not afraid of the break-up of old things, for he is sure that it is but the preparation for a re-forming. Let him preach the things that we all know. There is the evident fact of duty; some duties at least are clear. There is the joy of the right. There is the God in ourselves whom we cannot escape. Let the preacher speak of the ongoing that he sees, and the better future that he hopes for, and let him summon volunteers to enlist for its accomplishment. He shall not win his hearers so much by argument as by the contagion of faith. He shall help them to resolve their doubts by summoning them to activity. It is difficult to doubt the beneficence of the social process when one is heartily engaged in making it beneficent. He will most readily come to believe in God who has undertaken to be a worker in the task which God, if there be a God, must be engaged in.

A fourth type to whom the minister must preach are those who cannot see the social process because they have fallen down, and the ongoing has trodden over them. Some, through folly, selfishness, weakness, have fallen into sin, and they are in the anti-social class. Nothing means anything. They live in the present moment, to serve their greed, their lusts, to carry out their selfish plans, to wage their war upon society. Those we have called the unregenerate and the backsliders are the folk with the most limited view of life. Besides these are the discouraged, the suffering. They cannot see anything but their own pitiful need. Life is so harsh, so hopeless, that it cannot have any meaning. What can one do when the props are knocked from under him? How can one find God when he has no human friends? How can one believe that the world is good when it seems to be so bad?

The minister must always be more than a preacher to whomever he ministers, but it is evident that his ministry to the wandering and to the weary must be far more personal and practical than any words from the pulpit can be. Yet there is a preaching task here too. How shall he preach to those whose outlook is so contracted because of the very circumstances in which their life is cast? The use of such a technical expression as "the social process" seems not only cold but absurd in the face of such dire human need. Of course the wise preacher will not use the expression, but he will use the idea. We are seriously in need of a new evangelistic motive to take the place of the old self-regarding motive of personal salvation, or at least to supplement it. The new motive is in the message of Jesus. God is working in the world through those who are willing to work with him, but it is the tragedy of life that some are working against him. They think they cannot help it because of circumstance, habit, appetite, self-interest. God is ready to liberate them from such thralldom. Jesus told all kinds of people to follow him and help him save the world. The deserter is not to be shot but to be given an honorable place in the army. The prodigal is offered a chance of service in the father's house. Regeneration is the God-given power to begin to do one's duty.

The evangel to the troubled and discouraged is not different. It seems ungenerous to class them with the outcasts. But they are overwhelmed in the common misfortune. They have lost the view of the wholeness of life because they can see only their immediate necessities. The message of hope to such has generally

been that even if sickness, loss, injustice, deprives them of hope in this life there is another and a better life where God shall help them. And this is a good message. Does not the great ongoing reach beyond the grave? But there is an evangel for this life also. The friendless need friends, but most of all they need a chance to be friends. The lame need help, but most of all they need to be able to help someone else who is more helpless. The preacher must bring to the least the joy that he too can help in the mighty enterprise of making the world a human family.

The preacher who seeks to get some such vision of his goal as we have endeavored to set forth will do well to read the recent books on social psychology. We select Cooley's *Social Organization* because it presents very clearly the present condition in which we find ourselves. Instead of reviewing the book in detail, it has seemed better to interpret it in terms of the preacher's task, and the foregoing discussion is such an attempt. The minister who reads the book will constantly find illumination upon the most fundamental aspects of his vocation.

The psychology of the reconstruction of thinking with reference to the problems of religious belief is discussed in Coe's *Religion of a Mature Mind*. This also has been used as a basis for the foregoing analysis. A careful reading of the book will make clear what we have sought to present in the discussion of the static-religious type of mind.

As a practical attempt to preach from this point of view it is recommended that the *University of Chicago Sermons* be studied. The writers of those sermons would be the last to offer them to their brethren as homiletic models, but they would offer them as a sincere attempt to present the great meaning of religion to a modern congregation. Let each sermon be read with these questions in mind: (1) To what fundamental religious authority does the preacher appeal? (2) How may one know whether the preacher is presenting the truth? (3) What type of human living has the preacher in mind in his appeal? (4) What conception of the social process lies behind the sermon? (5) What comfort and faith are communicated by the sermon to the hearer? (6) How does the sermon deal with the realities that men actually know to exist in the world in which they live?

Questions for Discussion

1. How may the preacher best keep the glow of a great purpose in his ministry?
2. What present-day preachers most stimulate you, and what elements in their preaching seem to be most effective?
3. What are the conditions that produce the static-religious type of mind?
4. What problems does this type create for the preacher?
5. What are the conditions that produce the static-economic type of mind?
6. What problems does this type create for the preacher?
7. What are the pedagogical problems involved in the modernizing of a congregation through preaching?
8. In what way would the preaching that is concerned with homely virtues and simple faith contribute to such a goal as we have discussed?
9. A keen thinker recently said, "The greatest sin is to be behind the times." What did he really mean? What is involved in that idea for the preacher?

10. What would be a vital evangelistic preaching if one held before him the goal we have discussed?

Books for Further Reading

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| Cooley, <i>Human Nature and the Social Order.</i> | Mathews, <i>The Church and the Changing Order.</i> |
| Ross, <i>Social Psychology.</i> | R. J. Campbell, <i>New Theology Sermons.</i> |
| Coffin, <i>University Sermons.</i> | Brooks, <i>Lectures on Preaching.</i> |
| Rauschenbush, <i>Christianity and the Social Crisis.</i> | Faunce, <i>The Educational Ideal in the Ministry.</i> |